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Webster Staying at CIA Helm Through August
By RUTH SINAI
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WASHINGTON (AP) - William Webster is staying on as CIA director until the end of August in a move that appears to reflect White House concern about leaving the agency rudderless during the confirmation fight over his designated successor, Robert Gates.

Webster, 67, had planned to leave the CIA at the end of July to go into private legal practice, but he ``graciously consented'' to postpone his retirement at President Bush's behest, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said Tuesday.

Webster and Bush had hoped the Senate would have confirmed Gates by the end of July so he could assume the top CIA job.

But the Senate Intelligence Committee postponed its hearings until Sept. 16 after new testimony from a former CIA official who implicated three of his superiors in knowledge of the diversion of Iran arms sales profits to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua.

The testimony by Alan Fiers has raised new questions about whether Gates, too, might have known. Gates, who was deputy CIA director at the time the Iran-Contra scandal broke in 1986, testified that he didn't know. Nonetheless, he withdrew his 1987 nomination to head the CIA because of questions about the agency's involvement.

The Intelligence Committee is seeking limited immunity for Fiers so he can testify about Gates. Fiers has pleaded guilty to two counts of unlawfully withholding information from Congress in a plea bargain with Iran-Contra prosecutor Lawrence Walsh.

Fitzwater told reporters that Bush ``made an impassioned speech before the Cabinet this morning of the outstanding qualities of Bob Gates and how much he supports him.''

The president ``expressed his personal outrage at much of the efforts to denigrate (Gates') character by innuendo and leaked stories,''' said the spokesman. ``We think Bob Gates is an excellent candidate and he will be confirmed.''

Webster developed a reputation, first during nine years at the FBI and then over his four-year tenure at the CIA, for restoring confidence at troubled institutions.

He took over the CIA after the agency had been rocked by the Iran-Contra affair, in which its late director, William Casey, was deeply involved. Webster ordered an investigation, disciplined seven staff members and put in place clear-cut directives for reporting to Congress.

Bush would have liked Webster to stay through Gates' confirmation process but bowed to Webster's desire to start his new career, officials said.

After Webster leaves, they said, the president will likely appoint deputy director Richard Kerr to fill in until Gates or another successor is confirmed.